

[Skip to content](#)

Meny

Huvudnavigering

The Government of Sweden

- [About the Government of Sweden](#)
 - [Prime Minister's Office](#)
 - [Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister](#)
 - [Jessica Roswall, Minister for EU Affairs](#)
 - [Ministry of Climate and Enterprise](#)
 - [Ebba Busch, Minister for Energy, Business and Industry and Deputy Prime Minister](#)
 - [Romina Pourmokhtari, Minister for Climate and the Environment](#)
 - [Ministry of Culture](#)
 - [Parisa Liljestrand, Minister for Culture](#)
 - [Ministry of Defence](#)
 - [Pål Jonson, Minister for Defence](#)
 - [Carl-Oskar Bohlin, Minister for Civil Defence](#)
 - [Ministry of Education and Research](#)
 - [Mats Persson, Minister for Education](#)
 - [Lotta Edholm, Minister for Schools](#)
 - [Ministry of Employment](#)
 - [Johan Pehrson, Minister for Employment and Integration](#)
 - [Paulina Brandberg, Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life](#)
 - [Ministry of Finance](#)
 - [Elisabeth Svantesson, Minister for Finance](#)
 - [Erik Slottnér, Minister for Public Administration](#)
 - [Niklas Wykman, Deputy Minister for Finance, Minister for Financial Markets](#)
 - [Ministry for Foreign Affairs](#)
 - [Tobias Billström, Minister for Foreign Affairs](#)
 - [Johan Forssell, Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade](#)
 - [Ministry of Health and Social Affairs](#)
 - [Jakob Forssmed, Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health](#)
 - [Acko Ankarberg Johansson, Minister for Health Care](#)
 - [Anna Tenje, Minister for Older People and Social Security](#)
 - [Camilla Waltersson Grönvall, Minister for Social Services](#)
 - [Ministry of Justice](#)
 - [Gunnar Strömmer, Minister for Justice](#)
 - [Maria Malmer Stenergård, Minister for Migration](#)
 - [Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure](#)
 - [Peter Kullgren, Minister for Rural Affairs](#)
 - [Andreas Carlson, Minister for Infrastructure and Housing](#)

Government policy in Sweden & the EU

- [The Government's priorities](#)
- [Statement of Government Policy](#)
- [Statement of Government EU Policy](#)
- [Statement of Foreign Policy](#)
- [Central government budget](#)
- [Sweden in the EU](#)
- [Adult education](#)
- [Care for older people](#)
- [Central government administration](#)
- [Children's rights](#)
- [Civil defence](#)
- [Civil society and sport](#)
- [Combating terrorism](#)
- [Constitution of Sweden and personal privacy](#)
- [Consumer affairs](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Digital policy](#)

- [Disabilities](#)
- [Democracy and human rights](#)
- [Economic policy](#)
- [Education for children and young people](#)
- [Efforts to counter exclusion](#)
- [Emergency preparedness](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Enterprise and industry](#)
- [Environment and climate](#)
- [Family law](#)
- [Financial markets](#)
- [Foreign and security policy](#)
- [Gambling policy](#)
- [Gender equality](#)
- [Higher education, research and space](#)
- [Housing and community planning](#)
- [Innovation](#)
- [International development cooperation](#)
- [International law](#)
- [Integration](#)
- [Judicial system](#)
- [Labour law and work environment](#)
- [Labour market](#)
- [Liberal adult education](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Medical care](#)
- [Mental health and mental health care](#)
- [Migration and asylum](#)
- [Military defence](#)
- [Municipalities and regions](#)
- [Nordic affairs](#)
- [Public health](#)
- [Public procurement](#)
- [Regional development](#)
- [Rural affairs](#)
- [Social insurance](#)
- [Social services](#)
- [State-owned enterprises](#)
- [Student finance](#)
- [Taxes and tariffs](#)
- [Trade and investment promotion](#)
- [Transport and infrastructure](#)
- [Youth policy](#)

Documents & publications

- [Information material](#)
- [International development cooperation strategies](#)
- [Legal documents](#)
- [Reports](#)

How Sweden is governed

- [About how Sweden is governed](#)
- [The Swedish model of government administration](#)
- [The Constitution](#)
- [The principle of public access to official documents](#)
- [General elections and referendums](#)
- [Swedish legislation - how laws are made](#)
- [Committees](#)
- [Public agencies and how they are governed](#)
- [State-owned enterprises](#)

Press & contacts

- [Press contacts](#)
- [Government Offices Press Information Officers](#)
- [Ministry for Foreign Affairs Press Office](#)
- [International Press Centre](#)
- [Press releases](#)
- [Press Images](#)
- [Webcasts](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Listen](#)
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- [Swedish website](#)
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Search

Huvudnavigering

The Government of Sweden

- [The Government of Sweden](#)

[Prime Minister's Office](#)

- [Ulf Kristersson, Prime Minister](#)
- [Jessika Roswall, Minister for EU Affairs](#)

[Ministry of Climate and Enterprise](#)

- [Ebba Busch, Minister for Energy, Business and Industry and Deputy Prime Minister](#)
- [Romina Pourmokhtari, Minister for Climate and the Environment](#)

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- [Parisa Liljestrand, Minister for Culture](#)

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- [Pål Jonson, Minister for Defence](#)
- [Carl-Oskar Bohlin, Minister for Civil Defence](#)

[Ministry of Education and Research](#)

- [Mats Persson, Minister for Education](#)
- [Lotta Edholm, Minister for Schools](#)

[Ministry of Employment](#)

- [Johan Pehrson, Minister for Employment and Integration](#)
- [Paulina Brandberg, Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life](#)

[Ministry of Finance](#)

- [Elisabeth Svantesson, Minister for Finance](#)
- [Erik Slottnér, Minister for Public Administration](#)
- [Niklas Wykman, Deputy Minister for Finance, Minister for Financial Markets](#)

[Ministry for Foreign Affairs](#)

- [Tobias Billström, Minister for Foreign Affairs](#)
- [Johan Forssell, Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade](#)

[Ministry of Health and Social Affairs](#)

- [Jakob Forssmed, Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health](#)
- [Acko Ankarberg Johansson, Minister for Health Care](#)
- [Anna Tenje, Minister for Older People and Social Security](#)
- [Camilla Waltersson Grönvall, Minister for Social Services](#)

[Ministry of Justice](#)

- [Gunnar Strömmer, Minister for Justice](#)
- [Maria Malmer Stenergård, Minister for Migration](#)

[Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure](#)

- [Peter Kullgren, Minister for Rural Affairs](#)
- [Andreas Carlson, Minister for Infrastructure and Housing](#)

Government policy in Sweden & the EU

- [The Government's priorities](#)
- [Statement of Government Policy](#)
- [Statement of Government EU Policy](#)
- [Statement of Foreign Policy](#)
- [Central government budget](#)
- [Sweden in the EU](#)
- [Adult education](#)
- [Care for older people](#)
- [Central government administration](#)
- [Children's rights](#)
- [Civil defence](#)
- [Civil society and sport](#)
- [Combating terrorism](#)
- [Constitution of Sweden and personal privacy](#)
- [Consumer affairs](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Digital policy](#)
- [Disabilities](#)
- [Democracy and human rights](#)
- [Economic policy](#)
- [Education for children and young people](#)
- [Efforts to counter exclusion](#)
- [Emergency preparedness](#)
- [Energy](#)
- [Enterprise and industry](#)
- [Environment and climate](#)
- [Family law](#)
- [Financial markets](#)
- [Foreign and security policy](#)
- [Gambling policy](#)
- [Gender equality](#)
- [Higher education, research and space](#)
- [Housing and community planning](#)
- [Innovation](#)
- [International development cooperation](#)
- [International law](#)
- [Integration](#)
- [Judicial system](#)
- [Labour law and work environment](#)
- [Labour market](#)
- [Liberal adult education](#)
- [Media](#)
- [Medical care](#)
- [Mental health and mental health care](#)
- [Migration and asylum](#)
- [Military defence](#)
- [Municipalities and regions](#)
- [Nordic affairs](#)
- [Public health](#)
- [Public procurement](#)
- [Regional development](#)
- [Rural affairs](#)
- [Social insurance](#)
- [Social services](#)
- [State-owned enterprises](#)
- [Student finance](#)
- [Taxes and tariffs](#)
- [Trade and investment promotion](#)

- [Transport and infrastructure](#)
- [Youth policy](#)

Documents & publications

- [Information material](#)
- [International development cooperation strategies](#)
- [Legal documents](#)
- [Reports](#)

How Sweden is governed

- [How Sweden is governed](#)
- [The Swedish model of government administration](#)
- [The Constitution](#)
- [The principle of public access to official documents](#)
- [General elections and referendums](#)
- [Swedish legislation - how laws are made](#)
- [Committees](#)
- [Public agencies and how they are governed](#)
- [State-owned enterprises](#)

Press & contacts

- [Press contacts](#)
- [Government Offices Press Information Officers](#)
- [Ministry for Foreign Affairs Press Office](#)
- [International Press Centre](#)
- [Press releases](#)
- [Press Images](#)
- [Webcasts](#)
- [Contact](#)

Speech by [Prime Minister's Office](#)

Statement of Government Policy 12 September 2023

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Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, the Riksdag, 12 September 2023.

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Statement of Government Policy delivered by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Mr Speaker, Honourable Members of the Riksdag, ladies and gentlemen,

We live in a time of difficult challenges.

Sweden has not been in the immediate vicinity of a large-scale war of invasion since the Second World War.

We have not had such complex economic problems – high inflation, low growth and rising interest rates – since the crisis of the 1990s.

The world has not seen such major geopolitical tensions since before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

And Sweden has never before faced such serious threats to its internal security, including both terrorism and serious organised crime.

The fact is that no Swedish Government in modern times has had to simultaneously tackle challenges that are so numerous, so major and so difficult. Some crises are international, created by forces outside our country. Others are very much Sweden's own. Both the energy crisis and poor integration are the result of a long-term inability to address problems in time.

Setting a new course requires both perseverance and determination. Problems that have emerged over a long period require long-term efforts. And this is precisely why we must keep up the momentum. We are realists and do not underestimate Sweden's problems. But we are also optimists – and are convinced that they can be resolved.

The Government parties – the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats and the Liberal Party – are cooperating with the Sweden Democrats to implement necessary and long-awaited reforms.

The Government, which has now been working for almost eleven months, is implementing a paradigm shift in Swedish politics. We are moving away from the 'what will be, will be' approach to systematically tackling these problems. This is how we will transform resignation into expectation and make Sweden a stronger country.

We are overhauling energy and climate policy, and investing in new nuclear energy and more fossil-free electricity production.

We are overhauling criminal policy, with harsher sentences for gross offences and greater focus on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

We are overhauling crime prevention, with earlier intervention, more parental responsibility and clearer consequences for first offences.

We are overhauling migration policy and reducing immigration to give Sweden the opportunity to integrate those who are already here.

We are overhauling integration policy, focusing on ensuring that everyone learns Swedish, that it is always more worthwhile to work than to live on benefits, and that no women or young people have to live in honour-related oppression.

We are overhauling social policy to ensure that socially vulnerable children's right to security and long-term stability is always the guiding principle. Children's rights must take precedence over those of their parents.

We are overhauling school policy and focusing more on measurable knowledge, more textbooks and fewer screens – and more stringent requirements for those who want to start and run schools in Sweden.

We are overhauling health care policy and taking a firmer central government grip on quality, access and equity.

We are overhauling defence and security policy, strengthening Sweden's military defence, investing in civil defence, and joining NATO.

We are overhauling foreign policy and focusing on Europe, the Nordic and Baltic regions and transatlantic cooperation.

And we have overhauled economic policy to reduce inflation and increase growth. We are investing in Sweden as an entrepreneurial country, knowing that wealth must be created before it can be distributed.

Mr Speaker,

Solving serious societal problems requires both understanding them and having the strength to make decisions. Since the elections last autumn, Sweden has had a stable Government built on a majority in the Riksdag. It marks the end of a decade of parliamentary chaos with weak governments and rejected budgets. It also marks the beginning of a time of cooperation and taking responsibility.

The pace of reform has been high in the early days of this Government. A large number of inquiries have been appointed, and these will lay the foundation for new and necessary legislation. However, in light of the many and major societal problems, these reform processes must be quicker. They take too long, problems grow bigger and many people begin to distrust government's ability to act.

The Government Offices is not an ordinary central government administrative authority – it is the very hub for implementing political change. For this reason, the Government will strengthen the overall reform capability of the Government Offices.

Among other things, a function will be established under the Coordination Secretariat of the Prime Minister's Office, with experienced and well-qualified inquiry chairs who will undertake targeted inquiries. The aim is to shorten – even halve – the duration of inquiries, while maintaining high standards of legal precision. Major problems require thoroughness – but also swiftness.

Mr Speaker,

Around the world – and here in Sweden – there is a tendency towards dangerous polarisation of public debate. A sort of implacability and casting of suspicion on an opponent's character and motives. This risks destroying a beautiful aspect of our society.

We all want to pass on a better society to our children and grandchildren. But if a small country is to solve big problems, we must also come together and get things done. Come together to protect the values and ideals that once made Sweden strong. Come together to change what is no longer working. Come together to face internal and external threats to our safety and security.

In these troubled times, I want to lead a government for the whole of Sweden and for all Swedes – regardless of whether they were born here or elsewhere. Regardless of where in the country they live or which party they voted for. I want to bring people together, not drive them apart. I want to unite, not divide.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

The Government took over responsibility for an economy with high inflation of a kind Sweden had not seen for several decades. Households, companies and the business sector are under severe pressure. Sweden's wage earners have lost ten years of real wage gains. In light of this, the Government has three major economic policy tasks.

The first is fighting the inflation that is at the root of many of the acute economic problems. When responsible economic policy is necessary, the Government – and a majority of the Riksdag – must be capable of taking that responsibility. Not add fuel to the fire and spend more. Because we know from experience that that

kind of policy causes a considerable backlash: higher inflation, rising interest rates, diminished purchasing power, increased international distrust and a weaker krona. Sweden will not go down that path under our leadership.

Instead, this Government is focusing on mitigating the effects of inflation. This requires a cool head and a warm heart. In this autumn's budget, we will prioritise measures that safeguard welfare, strengthen Sweden's national security and relieve the burdens on hard-pressed households.

In addition, the long-planned review of the surplus target will begin during the autumn.

The second major task is laying the foundations for Sweden's future prosperity. Sweden needs higher growth and to become more competitive and even more attractive to investors. At the same time, we need to make major investments in fossil-free energy, research, education and infrastructure.

A new productivity commission has been appointed. The earned income tax credit for older people has been raised, as has the research and development deduction. The 3:12 rules are being reviewed to promote entrepreneurship. Electricity production will be expanded. Permit processes under the Swedish Environmental Code need to be developed and modernised. By making these processes shorter and more predictable, public authorities can help boost Sweden's competitiveness and preparedness. In this way, Sweden will be a winner when the whole of Europe makes the transition.

Sweden's position as a leading research nation must be safeguarded. The Government will appoint an AI commission tasked with providing guidance on how to capitalise on the huge opportunities, but also handle various risks.

The third task is the work-first principle. Everyone who can work should work and support themselves. A major benefit reform will be implemented, including a benefit ceiling, activity requirements to receive income support, and gradual qualification for welfare benefits. In addition, taxes on labour will be reduced. Stronger incentives to work – and to take the jobs that are available, wherever they are available – are needed. More people must also learn new skills to find a job.

For this reason, the Government has considerably expanded adult education and higher vocational education, adding at least 7 000 places. These are important investments. Because a job is more than just an income. Jobs offer participation in society and meaning in everyday life.

It must also be worthwhile to have worked. The Government is compensating for the deeply unfair tax situation for all those born in 1957. At the same time, we will make sure that the same injustice does not affect the next cohort.

One fundamental part of the work-first principle is the Swedish language. Everyone who permanently resides in Sweden must learn Swedish. Because it radically increases their chances of finding a job, but also because it enables them to understand the country they live in: its written laws, unwritten rules and values. For this reason, there must be higher standards and higher quality in the Swedish for Immigrants programme.

The social partners have taken huge responsibility in tough economic times. Soon the first labour market entry agreements will be in place – enabling more long-term unemployed people to find work. The Government will also boost funding to the Swedish Board of Student Finance following the agreement on the career transition package.

Mr Speaker,

Sweden's welfare model is in many ways unique. Our preschools, schools, higher education and health and social care services give people the security and the freedom to build a good life for themselves and their families. There is broad political agreement on this. Our welfare model is a source of pride, not conflict.

At the same time, Swedish welfare is founded on expectations of supporting oneself, respect, decency and effective controls. If any of these are lacking, our welfare is threatened. We see several such threats at the moment.

In the short term, inflation is the major economic threat. The Government will not leave health care, schools and social services to their fate. All of you home-help service workers ensuring that older people have dignity in their daily lives; all the teachers helping pupils to crack the reading code; all the midwives helping bring yet another baby into the world – you should know that we are safeguarding your important jobs. Your efforts play a crucial role in ensuring that people in our country feel assured that older people live good lives, that children are thriving in school and that the health care system is functioning. Thank you for all that you do.

In the autumn budget, we will prioritise welfare. We will also provide resources to help municipalities and regions to get through the difficult economic times that Sweden is in.

Sweden's schools are a decisive factor in the paths individual people's lives take, Sweden's long-term prosperity and society's democratic development. There is much that is working, but there are also major shortcomings.

In the wake of failed integration, an excessive number of pupils do not meet the knowledge requirements. One in five pupils in Year 4 has difficulty reading. Physical and mental insecurity are features of the day-to-day schooling of far too many pupils. In addition, unfair and unacceptable grade inflation has been uncovered in certain schools.

The Government is now taking vigorous action against all of this. An inquiry will propose how we can ensure that grades and merit ratings in compulsory school and upper secondary school fairly reflect pupils' knowledge.

For many years, schools have been shaped by pedagogical trends, gravely undervaluing in-depth factual knowledge. We are now changing this. The current abstract grade criteria and curriculums will be reformed, in favour of a more fact-based approach to knowledge.

The Government will review the poorly thought-out use of screens in the classroom. Research shows that analogue tools give children the best conditions to learn to read, write and do arithmetic. We will therefore implement a historic investment in textbooks. Screen time will be exchanged for reading time.

We will also ensure that pupils receive the support they need at an early stage. More special needs teachers and more small teaching groups will mean that more pupils can successfully complete school.

The Government is preparing extensive reforms to tackle problems in the independent school system. Stricter ownership and management assessments, bans or restrictions on distributing profits where failings have been established and heavy penalties will be introduced. Schools will now go back to basics: order rather than experimentation.

Sweden's health care has long been world-class, but there are unacceptably large geographical differences in access and quality. The long waiting times infringe the statutory right to the right care at the right time. The Government has begun the process of shortening health care waiting times and raising standards in the health care system. An all-party committee of inquiry will investigate the possibility of central government taking over full or partial responsibility.

The Government has also provided additional resources to increase the number of care places in a performance-based system. The next stage is to develop a national health care referral centre with an initial focus on patients who have been diagnosed with cancer. At the same time, adult and paediatric cancer care will be strengthened and the national cancer strategy will be updated.

Health care for women and girls has long been neglected, and it needs to be developed to be equitable and accessible. Knowledge of diseases that primarily affect women and girls specifically must increase. Women should not have to accept that it is normal to live with pain. This is a crucial matter of fundamental gender equality.

Mental health problems – not least among young people – are increasing in a deeply worrying way. Children and young people should not have to queue to access the help they need. Parents should not be left alone in their worry and despair. A national strategy for mental health and suicide prevention is currently being drafted and a national coordinator with overall responsibility for suicide prevention measures will be appointed.

At the same time, the conditions for people with disabilities to fully participate in society will be enhanced, including by improving interpreting services for deaf, hearing-impaired and deaf-blind people.

An inquiry will be appointed to strengthen high-cost protection in dental care so as to better match the protection offered for other forms of health care. Older people who have the greatest dental care needs will be prioritised.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

Committing a crime is ultimately a personal choice. Each individual has a personal responsibility not to choose a life of crime. Law and order policy must reflect that perspective.

The Government is implementing a fundamental shift in perspective – from focusing on the perpetrator to focusing on the victim and protecting society. We will make sentences more severe, and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service will be expanded to meet the needs of future reforms. A plan will be presented, but estimates show this involves at least doubling the number of places. The number of police officers is increasing at a high pace. This autumn, police officers will gain powers to also use secret coercive measures against criminal gangs preventively. And in the spring, sentences for gross firearms offences will be doubled.

The long-term but important task of redrafting parts of the Swedish Criminal Code has begun. We are moving ahead with more effective tools to access proceeds of crime. Special young offenders prisons will be established. And during the autumn an inquiry will be appointed on renting prison places abroad.

Violent acts are being committed by increasingly younger people. Ten-year-olds are lured with hamburgers, while 15-year-olds murder for money and prestige. No other country in Europe comes even remotely close to the escalation of violence in Sweden. Here, too, we see the results of high levels of immigration, in combination with failed integration and the State's inability to take timely action.

To succeed in the fight against gang crime, we must understand that repressive and preventive measures are not mutually exclusive. Taking a tough approach does not preclude taking a softer one. Both are necessary. Criminals must be stopped and punished, while at the same time we must prevent today's five-year-olds from becoming hardened 15-year-olds with guns in ten years' time. And the foundations of a path that does not lead to a life of crime are laid in the classroom.

Support to families is a preventive measure. Last autumn, parental support programmes, which we know are effective, were expanded. Or to quote the head of Kumla Prison: "That's where we need to start. Supporting mothers who are crying out for help."

The sport and recreational activities card is an important initiative subsidising opportunities for children and young people to take part in meaningful activities and gain a sense of belonging. Alternatives to the camaraderie of a gang are created in football teams and dance groups.

An inquiry has been appointed to remove secrecy provisions so that schools can contact social services and the police in time. And 40 years after the old Social Services Act was adopted, work has finally begun on drafting a new one.

Sweden needs social policy that is adapted to this day and age. Earlier intervention is needed to prevent and end exclusion. For this reason, there will be language screening at child health care centres, catch-up school at primary school level and more home visits to families in vulnerable areas. All children must have a good chance to succeed, regardless of their parents' living situation. But fine words are no longer enough: children's rights are safeguarded through practical policy measures.

Men's violence against women must be combated with the full force of society. The Government is examining the possibilities of substantially expanding the geographical area of non-contact orders in the case of particularly serious threats, and also being able to detain violent men in more cases. We have also enhanced the possibilities for civil society to support women who have been, or are at risk of being, subjected to violence and honour-based oppression. In this respect, women's and girls' shelters throughout the country are carrying out important activities that should be highlighted.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

After decades of too much immigration and too little integration, a paradigm shift is now taking place in Swedish immigration policy. Over the last twelve years, 1.2 million foreign nationals have immigrated to Sweden, and during the same period 700 000 people have been granted Swedish citizenship.

Many of them will help make Sweden stronger, richer and better. But the scale of this extensive immigration to Sweden has also placed great strain on our society. Integration problems now affect most policy areas. For this reason, the Government is overhauling its policy. The aim of the reforms is to shift Sweden from being one of the countries that has received the most asylum seekers to adapting our asylum legislation to the minimum required by the EU.

Those who have received an expulsion order must leave Sweden. The shadow society must be combated and the exploitation of vulnerable people mitigated. The Government is strengthening the tools and streamlining these efforts. The number of detention centre places will be increased. Greater demands will be placed on countries that refuse to accept their own expelled citizens. Those who lied or cheated to obtain residence permits will have them revoked.

We now see decreasing migration pressures on Sweden, despite an increase in Europe. But the major shift has just begun.

The rules for low-skilled labour migration will be tightened, while the opportunities for highly-skilled labour migration will be improved. Sweden must be a country that welcomes international talent and expertise.

At the same time, the honest lifestyle requirement for foreigners living in the country will be tightened. It must be easier to revoke residence permits and expel more people if they commit criminal offences. The incentives to stimulate voluntary returns are being reviewed.

The Government believes in a Sweden where people from different backgrounds can live side by side. But this requires a common ground that unites and holds us together. The most important components of this sense of community are the Swedish language, the rights and obligations associated with citizenship, and respect for fundamental Swedish values. The expectations and requirements on becoming part of Swedish society must be made clearer. If you do not wish to become part of this community, you should not seek to come here.

A new and better social orientation programme will be introduced that will include testing of participants' knowledge of Swedish society, democracy and fundamental norms and values.

Efforts to introduce a language requirement to become a Swedish citizen are continuing. The Government is also reviewing the settlement regulations so that municipalities are better able to ensure good integration.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

The defence of Ukraine's freedom and sovereignty will be the main task of foreign policy in the years ahead. Ukraine's fate is intertwined with that of Europe as a whole. The country is now fighting a battle for its very existence.

Just under a year ago, I said in this chamber that Sweden would provide as much support as possible to Ukraine – politically, economically and militarily. Today I can state that Sweden is among the ten largest donors. To date, we have provided more than SEK 25 billion in support, and Sweden has just announced a development cooperation strategy that is the single most comprehensive ever. Ukraine will now be our largest recipient of development cooperation. Within the framework of our support, Ukraine has received some of our most advanced weapons systems. Sweden will continue to support Ukraine for as long as it takes.

The cornerstones of Sweden's foreign and security policy that were presented in the last Statement of Government Policy remain unchanged. They are a rules-based international order, the defence of democracy and human rights, and respect for the Charter of the United Nations. We protect our interests best in cooperation with other countries. Sweden's foreign policy will be conducted on a European, Nordic-Baltic and transatlantic basis.

Assession to NATO, following Türkiye's commitments in Vilnius to ratify Sweden's membership, will be an epoch-making change for our country. But it will also be like coming home. Sweden is finally taking the step into the defence community of Western democracies, into the circle of countries where we belong. This completes the change of Swedish security policy that began with membership of the EU.

Sweden will not only receive support, it will give support and contribute to the security of the entire Alliance. In addition, the largest scale-up of the total defence since the 1950s is now under way. The military sector is growing, Sweden is acquiring next-generation submarines and combat aircraft, the Armed Forces' future supply of staff is being strengthened and investments are being made in advanced technologies and innovation. We are also a leading space nation and will remain at the forefront in this field.

Civil defence is also being strengthened. Civil defence shelters are being set up, security of supply is being reinforced and cyber defence is being expanded. Next year, the appropriations to military defence will increase by more than SEK 27 billion, which means that Sweden will already have achieved the NATO standard of at least two per cent of GDP in 2024.

The European Union is not only Sweden's most important foreign policy platform, it is also a community of values. The EU is of crucial importance to our economy and competitiveness, to climate action and to our ability to safeguard Sweden's national interests at global level.

During its Presidency of the Council of the EU, Sweden showed strong leadership on several issues that are crucial for the future of the Union as a whole: climate, migration and support to Ukraine. We will use the lessons learned from the Presidency to become a more active, engaged and proactive member of the EU.

China's conduct towards Taiwan is worrying, and threats of military violence are unacceptable. Sweden's relations with China must be anchored in a European strategy and in close transatlantic cooperation. Important steps in this direction were taken during our Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Recent events in connection with actions and demonstrations clearly show how important it is to protect Sweden. Foreign states, state-like actors and individual provocateurs may exploit the situation. The attacks on Swedish diplomatic missions are just one example of the threat to Swedish lives and interests. Disinformation campaigns are another. This Government will always defend freedom of expression as a core Swedish value, but at the same time ensure the safety of Sweden and of Swedes.

Sweden will remain a globally engaged country that stands up for human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law. Development cooperation, climate and trade policy are key to these efforts. Reform of development cooperation will continue, with a focus on a long-term perspective, effectiveness and transparency. The fact that Sweden is one of the world's most generous donors also entails great responsibility. Development cooperation saves lives and alleviates suffering. Democratic development around the world is under threat: Swedish support to democratisation, human rights defenders and democracy activists must remain strong.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

Sweden will pursue an ambitious and effective climate policy to achieve the climate goals. The Swedish business sector will be given the conditions to lead the green transition.

Reconciling global climate change and Swedish energy needs requires a government that understands the link between energy and the climate. This insight guides Sweden's national and international climate policy.

One of the world's most ambitious climate packages was finalised under the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU. When 450 million Europeans make the transition, it will make a real difference.

The climate package will now be carried on into the work on an updated national climate policy. In October, the inquiry on a new strategy for Sweden's climate policy, based on the new EU climate legislation, will present its report. This will be an important jumping off point for the work on the next climate action plan, which will be presented before Christmas.

This Government took office following many years of mismanagement of the Swedish energy system and more than 40 years of devastating conflict surrounding nuclear power. Now rebuilding has begun. This is a critical issue – for households, for business and for the climate.

When energy demands double, more fossil-free energy is needed. The Government is drafting a roadmap to enable an effective and extensive expansion of nuclear power to be implemented as quickly as possible. An energy policy bill will be presented during this parliamentary year.

In addition, the funding allocated to restore wetlands will be strengthened, and the extensive state aid to biogenic carbon capture and storage remains in place.

The Government is investing heavily in electrification and enabling the continued expansion of charging infrastructure throughout the country.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

The conditions for living and working throughout the country must be improved. This is why the Government has established a separate Ministry of Rural Affairs and Infrastructure.

Agricultural and food policy is being overhauled. The aim is to increase the competitiveness and profitability of Swedish agriculture while maintaining and safeguarding Sweden's high animal welfare standards. The Government is drafting a legislative proposal to introduce direct alcohol sales from farms while safeguarding Systembolaget's monopoly.

Forests are a strategic resource for both the climate and Swedish competitiveness. Forests are also a source of national pride and a key part of our Swedish cultural heritage. A sustainable forestry policy must be able to combine environmental considerations with the economic conditions for conducting forestry operations. A forestry inquiry will be appointed.

You do not need to travel far in our country to realise that major investments are needed in the road and rail network. Maintenance of the Swedish road and rail network must be improved to facilitate people's everyday lives and commuting to work, but also freight traffic that promotes jobs and growth throughout the country.

More people must have access to good housing. Today, access to the housing market is blocked by excessive regulations and overly high thresholds, particularly for young people. The Government will therefore focus on increasing access to buildable land, simplifying building regulations and lowering the thresholds into the housing market. More rental apartments, more tenant-owned housing and more houses are needed.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

Liberal democracy is strongly rooted in Sweden. But it must also be won anew by every generation.

There is broad parliamentary consensus behind the proposal to strengthen the independence of the courts. The Government has also initiated efforts to strengthen the protection of democratic rights and freedoms. A new all-party committee of inquiry has been tasked with investigating whether newer fundamental rights and freedoms – such as the right to abortion, the right to a fair hearing, and general protection against discrimination – should be added to the Instrument of Government.

Culture is a strong and unifying force in Swedish society. The efforts to produce a cultural canon will take concrete shape this year, while at the same time reading promotion will be strengthened. Funding to several long-term grants will continue, along with the work to institute a cultural protection council.

The insight that society is bigger than the state is an important part of Swedish democracy. This includes not least free media, independent research and a dynamic community, congregational and cultural life. The diversity of Swedish society is a strength as we look to the challenges of the future. Christians, Muslims, Jews and non-religious people live here side by side. Freedom of religion is a given in Sweden – as is the right to question religion.

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of liberal democracy. The Government will continue the efforts to secure the release of journalist Dawit Isaak and publisher and poet Gui Minhai. At the same time, the Government is working intensively on other consular cases involving detained Swedish citizens, most recently that of EU official Johan Floderus. The Government demands that they all be released.

Sweden will remain a strong voice for gender equality, both at home and globally. Several important successes were achieved during the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Government is stepping up efforts to combat honour-based oppression, including by reviewing the scales of penalties for coercion to marry and child marriage offences.

Through a special initiative, the Government is raising the level of ambition in the efforts to combat antisemitism.

In Sweden, everyone must be able to live in safety, regardless of religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation. We will continue the journey of freedom that has led to increased acceptance and equal rights for LGBTIQ people by reviewing discriminatory regulations. Homosexual men will be able to give blood under the same conditions as everyone else.

* * *

Mr Speaker,

This year, Sweden is celebrating 500 years as an independent nation. In this time, we have evolved from one of Europe's poorest countries into a prosperous welfare society. From an absolute monarchy to one of the strongest democracies in the world. A country with social equality, gender equality and a strong sense of community. An open and innovative country where successful businesses export goods to the whole world. A country where we care about one another.

We have made impressive changes in just a few decades. We have been pioneers of fossil-free energy production, turned the financial crisis of the 1990s around and established robust public finances, and replaced widespread benefit dependence with the work-first principle.

We have achieved all of this through our common efforts and it demonstrates what we as a country can accomplish together. Our strengths are so much greater than the problems we are currently facing. We can do it all again.

It is now our responsibility to strengthen Sweden for future generations, so that Sweden can remain a fantastic country – not just for 5 years, or 50 years, but at least the next 500 years.

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